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Spooking the First Amendment

The CIA Mounts an Operation on a Book

By Roger Wilkins

A FUNNY thing happened to author Alfred W. McCoy on the way to his publication date. He and his publisher, Harper & Row almost got spooked by the CIA in a gambit that does little credit to our secret overseas operatives. It seems that in his book, "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia," Mr. McCoy argues that American diplomats and secret agents have been significantly involved in the narcotics traffic in the "golden triangle" of Laos, Thailand and Burma. The CIA, upon learning something of the content of the book, apparently decided that it had cause for the expression of some concern. As a result, the author alleges, the agency resorted to "extralegal measures" such as CIA visits to the publisher, telephone calls and letters in an attempt "to harass and intimidate me and my publisher."

I am not concerned with the accuracy of Mr. McCoy's text or his methods of scholarship. I do, however, wonder about the way in which the government expressed its interest in his work. Whether there were visits to the publisher or phone calls, as Mr. McCoy alleges, is not the point. It is clear that the general counsel of the CIA wrote and asked to see the book prior to publication. While he denied that the agency's interest affected in any way the publisher's right to publish, the general counsel went on to apply some heavy pressure, saying "it is our belief that no reputable publishing house would wish to publish such allegations without being assured that the supporting evidence was valid."

HARPER & ROW, for its part, told the agency that it desired to publish the book but also to "live up to the traditions and responsibilities of a great publishing house as we see them." Overriding the author's protests, the publisher decided to submit the book for an unusual pre-publication review by the CIA. A source at Harper & Row reports that the agency wrote the firm saying that it could "prove beyond doubt" that

McCoy's facts were wrong. After reviewing the book, the agency attempted, in an 11-page critique, to demonstrate that the author's evidence did not support his assertions. Apparently, after reviewing the CIA critique, Harper & Row decided the agency



had not proved its case. "They just didn't do it," the source reports. So, the book will see the light of day.

Unfortunately, this is neither the government's nor the CIA's first venture into the murky business of attempting to impose pre-publication restraints on the words and ideas the citizens of this country are to read and consider. The Justice Department's thrust against the Pentagon Papers is still fresh in memory. And the CIA has a rich

history in this business. In recent years, the agency has flitted from Random House to Putnam to courtrooms and to Harper & Row trying to influence what the rest of us do or don't read about the CIA.

But the agency cannot have it both ways. It cannot hide away in the woods when it pleases and then tell the mirrors of the world what to show when it becomes edgy. Its message to Harper & Row was especially pernicious. While disclaiming any intention to inhibit publication, the agency suggested more than once that no reputable or responsible publisher would want to publish a book without first validating the facts. And then the agency offered itself as chief validator. I am not sure whether the publisher needed to go as far as submitting the galley proofs of the book to the CIA for pre-publication review in order to ascertain the agency's views or whether, indeed, that decision was entirely wise. But to its credit, Harper & Row resisted the pressures and retained the ultimate publishing judgment.

THAT IS all to the good, for the CIA, in offering its services as ultimate validator of the author's source material, was dangling a lure that leads down the path to acquiescence in censorship. If Clifford Irving's caper taught us anything, it was that the publisher has ultimate responsibility for checking the validity of the material he proposes to publish. It is clear that the publisher, upon learning that serious questions have been raised about the reliability of material it has on hand, should at least talk the questions over with any responsible doubter.

But finally, the responsibility rests with the publisher, it cannot and should not be shifted to any other party, particularly not to a secret agency of the government. Any other course would lead to the erosion of a publisher's most precious right, the first amendment right of free speech, which is his only guarantee of his ability to promote the free flow of information and ideas throughout society, and our only guarantee as well.

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